November 8 1966

The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

An evening of crime and detection

"THE KENNEL MURDER CASE" (Warner Brothers, 1933) Directed by Michael Curtiz
Screenplay by Peter Milne and Robert N. Lee from the novel by S.S. Van Dine; Camera: William Reeves; 7 reels.

We'll go out on a limb and suggest that "The Kennel Murder Case", S.S. Van Dine's 6th Philo Vance novel (and the fifth to be filmed) is one of the very best films of its genre, and that Powell, flawlessly cast, was by far the most satisfactory of the ten players who took on the Vance character between 1929 and 1947.

The beauty of "The Kennel Murder Case" is that it succeeds despite the limitations of its breed, and without really departing from what was then a popular and successful formula, but which would date very badly if the film hadn't had real style to begin with. For a start, Van Dine's novel is beautifully worked out, and unlike many movie adaptations, this one follows it to the letter. Inevitably talkative, it does however manage to avoid the static and ponderous quality which had marked "Canary Murder Case" and "Greene Murder Case" (because of their undue length) and many later ones (because of their lack of imagination). From its impressively opening titles, "The Kennel Murder Case" has real zip and pace. Potentially slow scenes are broken up via camera movement, interesting lighting, and a stress on low angles which seem to put the audience in the position of being an eavesdropper. There are some unusually good, and well-used, miniatures of the adjoining houses which figure so prominently in the action, and a frequent resort to swish-pans to keep the tempo lively. The foreground dialogue is suave, polished and informative, as it should be in these mystery circles, while the background dialogue - often all but thrown away - is both naturalistic and crackling. The performances, dominated of course by Powell's smooth elegance, are uniformly good, and there's a marvellous collection of suspects. The first reel positively works overtime in setting up motives for the murder, since the incredibly unpleasant victim-to-be never opens his mouth unless it be to renege on a deal, issue a racial insult (the Chinese have quite a rough time of it in this picture) or befoul the path of young love. If the identity of the murderer is all too obvious even before the killing has taken place, it's only because the gentleman in question, in decades of loyal service in mystery films, has only once failed to be revealed as the least suspicious and most guilty party in the last reel! However, in 1933 his perfidy was less well-known, so this is hardly a weakness of the picture, which not only has an unusually intriguing mystery, but a logical and well-arrived at solution too. Typical of the upper-crust mystery tales, in which everybody lives in palaces or mansions but modestly calls them houses, "The Kennel Murder Case" should delight who-dun-it? aficionados, while being slick and short enough to transcend that category and entertain anybody who likes a good well-turned-out movie. Incidentally, it was remade in 1940 as "Calling Philo Vance" - with James Stephenson in the lead - but somewhat updated with a World War Two spy element intruding into the villainy.

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STATE'S ATTORNEY" (Rko Radio, 1932) Directed by George Archainbaud
Written by Gene Fowler and Rowland Brown from a story by Louis Stevens; Camera: Leo Tovell; Sound by David O. Selznick; Associate Producer, James Kevin McGuinness; 8 reels.
With John Barrymore, Helen Twelvetrees, Jill Esmond, William Boyd, Ralph Ince, Mary Duncan, Oscar Apfel, Raoul Boulien, Frederick Burton, Ethel Sutherland, Leon Wayoff (Ames), C. Henry Gordon, Nat Pendleton, Lloyd Ingraham.

It is almost eight years since we last ran "State's Attorney" and - tv apart - it hasn't been shown in New York in the interim. It's frequently astonishing how basically similar films from the same year fare so differently with the passage of time. Barrymore's "Counsellor at Law" made the same year, likewise
based on a stage play, but directed by William Wyler, remains a much more vital and certainly more cinematic piece of work than "State's Attorney", which still smacks of the theatre and has many of the flaws of early talkies.

But forget all that. It's Barrymore material at its best - almost hand-tailored for him by his friend Gene Fowler, even if it does give him scenes and characteristics almost too painfully reflective of his own personal life and problems. Based on the career of the famous lawyer Fallon (also the basis of Warren William's "The Mouthpiece", and subsequent remakes with George Brent and Edward G. Robinson) it gives Barrymore full rein for deliberate theatrics (as in the several dynamic if hardly legal court-room episodes), for wry comedy (a delightful drunken episode) and for those moments of almost unbearably affecting pathos which nobody could do as well as Barrymore. (The sequence wherein Barrymore, with genuine remorse tells his mistress that he has just married, is a beautifully played episode). If not at his finest, Barrymore is still very good indeed - and moreover seems to be enjoying the role - so that he completely transcends the somewhat dated aspects of the rest of the film. Perhaps it is his completely undated performance that throws into relief the film's rather old-hat methods.

Not that the non-Barrymore aspect of the film is dull, and its political chicaneries certainly make it a topical movie for this election night! The script continually offers gutsy situations and top-notch lines, while the cast gives us such reliable old-timers as C. Henry Gordon and Ralph Ince at their best. The gangster-prohibition era automatically adds its own flavoring. And of course both Helen Twelvetrees and Jill Esmond remain as appealing as ever. Most of the flaws can be directed back to George Archainbaud, fine on melodrama and westerns (he made some of the best Hopalong Cassidy's), but always a little out of his depth in straight dramatic and non-action material.

Like most of the Rkos currently available, "State's Attorney", while complete and in first-rate physical condition, seems to have been made from a new and not very carefully made 16mm negative, resulting in softer picture quality than we'd like. So if some of the long-shots appear a trifle out of focus, please don't - on this occasion - blame the projectionist! Incidentally, like "Kennel Murder Case", "State's Attorney" was later remade -- as "Criminal Lawyer" in the late 30's, with Lee Tracy, Margot Grahame and Eduardo Cianelli.

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